

# Words that Cut the Heart 1) “I Came to Bring Division”

Luke 12:49–53 • 2025-08-17 • Series: Words that Cut the Heart



General William Tecumseh Sherman is most widely remembered for his famous March to the Sea during the American Civil War. At the end of 1864 he had captured Atlanta and made his way to Savannah. He made a path of destruction on his way across –hoping that the south would be more likely to surrender if they personally felt the effects of the war. He burned towns and made a wide path as he set fire to the fields and forests. His scorched earth policy had burned all the fields and their crops. He also destroyed over three-hundred miles of railways. He didn't just burn the south. He burned down their determination and ability to wage the war. Fire and utter destruction will do that sort of thing. After a year he made it to South Carolina which was at the heart of the confederate cause, the first state to rebel. At Columbia he had his men set fire to the city. But he knew this was probably going too far. So, he reported that the fire was started by confederates and fed by the strong winds. He later wrote, “I never ordered it.” The man known for his desire to let the south burn was afraid to stand behind the burning of two-thirds of an entire city, including non-military targets. Though everyone knew his soldiers were responsible for the fire, he denied it.

Jesus says why he has come, and the picture doesn't sound too rosy. He stated his mission: “*I have come to bring fire on the earth.*” Fire divides, scorches, brings pain. But Jesus doesn't hide behind or apologize for any of the fire which he came to start. And it isn't that Jesus is shy or hesitant to bring it. He is eager for it. “How I wish it were already kindled!”

Today we begin an eight-week series looking at difficult words which cut the heart. Before Jesus' disciples would get too comfortable with what lay ahead, he gave them some important warnings about what to expect. And though these words might cut the heart, they end up bringing us just what we need.

What does Jesus mean by bringing fire on the earth? We know that he will bring fire when he comes again to judge the world. Though the saints yearn for God's kingdom to come and this world to end, Jesus isn't talking about that fire here. Is he talking about the tongues of fire that came at Pentecost? No, the fire he is talking about here brings division, not unity. He isn't talking about the final judgment day fire or the symbolic fire of the Spirit. He is referring to his coming in lowliness, his first coming. What could Jesus mean when he says he came in lowliness to bring fire on the earth?

Around here fires begin as careless drivers drag their chains on the road. Other fires are spread as campers grow careless. And fires are kindled with random strikes of lightning. Jesus explains what must happen to kindle this fire. It's not carelessness or anything random. It is part of a serious, divine plan. It is a plan that Jesus is agonizing over. “But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!”

The fire is kindled with a baptism? Jesus had already been baptized by John. Here baptism is used figuratively in the sense of something poured out upon a person; it's an ordeal that must happen to initiate something. Jesus also referred to this ordeal as drinking a cup of suffering. At this point Jesus has yet to undergo the outpouring of suffering upon him. Jesus came to bring fire on the earth. And it would be kindled by his suffering and death. He would be beaten and flogged. He would be raised up on the cross and mocked. He would hang and suffer a terrible death. He knew that this was why he came. It's not that he was eager to suffer. But he knew that this suffering must take place for his mission to be accomplished. As he is eager for the fire to come upon the earth, so he is eager to finish this work that lay ahead of him.

This is why Jesus came! This is why the Son of God took on human flesh! This, brothers and sisters, is the gospel. And the gospel, from one perspective brings fire on earth and not peace.

You might wonder, “Didn't Jesus come to bring peace?” Yes, he did. He came to bring peace for all. He came as the angels said at his birth to being “Peace on earth, goodwill toward men on him his favor rests.” Jesus brings us to peace with God as he fulfills the will of God and takes our place for the punishment of sin from a just and holy God. There is peace between you and me and God because of Christ. He brought peace to our hearts. Jesus brought peace to us from God. It is a peace that surpasses all human understanding. It is one which nothing can destroy, an everlasting peace.

But when it comes to the interaction between people in this world, Jesus' coming produces a different scene: division. General Sherman knew the only way to peace was to win the war in the south. For him that involved literally burning, devastating, and dividing up the land. Jesus knew that for a world dividing against God, there had to be a tough division.

Can you picture that division as it first played out after Jesus' passion? It broke the tie between priests and those they served. It divided the synagogues of the Jews. It brought about a break between family members in all the first century Jewish households. Even Jesus' own brothers or relatives didn't believe him at first. It brought such a strife in his family that Jesus couldn't entrust his brothers to care for their own mother. It brought a rift between the families of those who first believed that the man Jesus was the Messiah. The people didn't always agree. They, in a spiritual struggle, were placed on opposite sides of the warfare. Those who rejected Jesus rejected his followers. Some were dragged off into prison. They were disowned by their families. Some family members betrayed others and handed them over for trial and death. “I have come to bring fire... division.”

And what a fire Jesus brought! Throughout history and still today that fire has been burning. It actually began with the first prophecy of Christ in which it was said he would bring hostility between the devil and Eve, and between believers and unbelievers. It began with the first two brothers. Cain beat his brother Able to death in hatred and jealousy.

And the fire and division rages on. Still today a Christian is killed for the simple confession of faith in Jesus as Savior. Still today a family member will mock and turn against their parents and siblings into unbelief. Still today you hear of one family member who says, "My mom and dad go to church...but I don't believe all that stuff." A mother says to her daughter, "What happened? You once loved Jesus." The daughter no longer listens to the Word of Christ as she follows her own way. A daughter-in-law turns against her mother-in-law as she brings her husband to faith in Jesus. The mother can't believe her son would turn away from rationalism, or ancestor worship to worship Jesus and become a Christian. Family members are disowned for turning away from honoring their dead ancestors. Close family ties are severed as one family member wants to practice revisionist history with the Bible and change the Words while others hold to Christ and the historical faith. Some of you don't have to struggle to picture the pain and division this brings. You know the hurt of a family member, a loved one saying, "I have to make my own decision." And by that you know they mean, "I don't have to believe all that Bible stuff. I'll believe just the parts I want." A fire divides. Christ divides.

Yes, Jesus brings peace. But be careful not to misunderstand what type of peace Jesus' passion brings. "*Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.*" Don't misunderstand the result of God's intervention in a sin-filled world. We are in spiritual warfare. Either you believe the gospel and the Word of Christ, or you don't. It is a fire which either divides and puts on the side of Satan or on the side of Christ as Savior. It is the only foundation on which you can stand when the fire of Judgment comes on the last day. It is the only side which wins in the end. Until he returns, he has brought fire for us. Spiritual forces of evil will continue to do what Satan first did in the garden: deceive and divide. Flaming arrows of the enemy will attack believers and seek to turn them aside from the gospel. The cry will ever go out against believers, "Did God really say that? Did he really redeem you from your sins?"

Jesus predicted that his saving work would bring division. He said on the night before he died that those who would arrest and kill him would think they were doing a service to God. Still today in the name of God people arrest and kill Christians. His warning is there. Don't be surprised if the division becomes evident even with your closest ties.

So why did Jesus come if he knew it would result in such division? It was the only way. If he didn't come, then the only division there would be is an entire world lost and opposed to God. God knew from eternity that men would hate him. He knew that there would be those who would refuse to listen. But he still came. He still longed for them. And he desired to bring you and I safely out of that division. In grace he came. As the true Son of God, he didn't have to be on the earth. He didn't have to walk in human flesh and live among us. But he came. He set aside his divine glory and his majesty and came as in human form. He was born of the virgin Mary and grew up 2000 years ago in ancient Israel. So, Jesus says here, "I have come... to undergo a baptism, an ordeal, an outpouring of suffering. To suffer, die, take on the weight and curse of sin. Even if it will result in division, even if not all will listen and believe. Even if it must result in division. I have come so that those who believe might be saved."

We were born as those outside the family of God. That dividing line was not once between us and family or friends; it was once between us and our God. By nature, we stood in the division which the whole world stands on its own: facing the fire of God and his holy wrath over sin. Doomed as objects of wrath we had every reason to rebel further and strive against our God and his kingdom. The devil would continue to blind us to the gospel and bring us to join him in eternal fire. But Jesus came to bring about a division. He promised Eve that he would put hostility between Eve and the Serpent. He said there would be hostility between Eve's offspring (believers) and Satan's offspring (unbelievers). Why? Because one born of the woman would come to defeat the Serpent. Jesus came to suffer in order to overcome the lies of Satan and the effects of sin. He won. He came out from the baptism of his suffering with a new life. He rose to life in victory over the enemy. And he will bring us forever out of this world of sin and those who oppose God. And will be forever purified and in his presence. The only division we will know is the one which separates God and his redeemed from their enemies.

And don't misunderstand. His grace is still there for his enemies. God called you from the wrong side of the division to his kingdom of grace. He can still do the same for his enemies today. Rather than ignoring or changing our faith so that we obscure or avoid division—let that division stand evident. Stand apart from those who oppose Jesus. Let others know they are enemies of Christ if they are not in faith. There is still time for them to be brought from division with God to peace with him. Do not fail to say there is division wherever there is warfare against God.

I'm sure that General Sherman knew his coming would cause a lot of people a lot of pain. Just as the civil war brought pain and divided families. But he also knew it was war. And fire would articulate who was on whose side and who had the will to fight on. So, hold on to Christ. The life of faith will not be an easy one. Expect to see fiery division in this world. Expect that division to be one that will even test your love for God and family. But know that Jesus desired to bring about this division because he knew it better that some be saved than all the world be lost. It was grace that moved him to come. And his grace has brought you into his love.